

Germany: More of the Old Kohl, Only Even Stodgier

By Josef Joffe

MUNICH — The boring campaign ended in a down-to-the-wire finale, and the status quo won.

Chancellor Helmut Kohl has not only beaten his Social Democratic rival Rudolf Scharping. He is also set to outdo his much admired mentor Konrad Adenauer, the founding father of the Federal Republic. Adenauer ran West Germany for 14 years. If his heir, with 12 years in power already, manages to avoid an untimely demise, be it of the political or the biological kind, he will be able to pack in up to 16 years — more than Franklin D. Roosevelt and almost as much as the "Iron Chancellor" Otto von Bismarck, who tallied 19 years.

In your average democracy, 12 years should have been enough. It would have been "time for a change," and all that. Hence the really interesting point about this election is not the slender margin of Mr. Kohl's victory but the fact itself.

Half a year ago, Mr. Scharping looked like a shoo-in. Mr. Kohl and his Christian Democrats looked hopeless, and so did his junior coalition partners, the Free Democrats under Foreign Minister Klaus Kinkel. So by international standards this was the greatest comeback since Richard Nixon's in 1968.

How did Mr. Kohl do it? It was not really he who turned the tide, but the two usual suspects in democratic politics: the strength of the economy and the weakness of his rival.

By early summer, the business cycle pointed up, up, up. It was a *real* upswing, not the kind of faltering one that failed to push George Bush past Bill Clinton in 1992. Starting in the summer, good news tumbled in almost daily, robbing Mr. Scharping of a sure-win issue by the fall. As growth, export and investment figures headed north, so did Mr. Kohl's popularity ratings. In the end, he had put 14 points between himself and Mr. Scharping.

The second usual suspect was the Social Democratic contender: young, inexperienced, a bit clumsy under the klieg lights, and not firmly in control of his party, whose heart beat farther left than Mr. Scharping's.

Also, he had a "Hillary problem." No, not his real-life wife but his partner in political marriage, the Greens, who returned to the Bundestag with 7.3 percent of the vote. With their anti-NATO, pro-pacifist posture and radical economic agenda — for example, 5 marks (\$3.3 dollars) for a liter of gas — the Greens were just a bit too much for your average

German burgher who likes his car and his cozy place in the Western alliance.

So Mr. Scharping won a few points, but not enough to unseat Mr. Kohl, who will now have to make do with a slender majority. That is good news for the rest of the world, which must have breathed a sigh of relief from Washington via Brussels to Bratislava.

Mr. Kohl is a dyed-in-the-wool Europeanist, perhaps the last in a long succession from Konrad Adenauer to Helmut Schmidt. He is also a good Atlanticist, always careful to give unto Paris without taking from Washington. He stands (more or less) for free trade, and wants (more or less) to open the West's doors to the East Europeans. And he is not gripped by obsessive angst when it comes to fielding the army for a peace mission here or there.

The only true surprise in this election was the astounding score of the PDS, the successor of the East German Communists who presided over the Prusso-Marxist enterprise known as the GDR. The "Party of Democratic Socialism" will field 30 stalwarts in the new Bundestag. But with their deep-red rhetoric they will mainly embarrass the center left, the Social Democrats and the Greens.

The PDS represents the revolt of the dispossessed nomenklatura and the resentment of reunification's losers. But Eastern Germany is forging ahead at an 8 percent growth rate, and so it is likely to be swan song time for the PDS in the next general election, in 1998 at the latest.

The problem lies elsewhere. Not only must Mr. Kohl govern with no votes to spare; in effect he must rule with the consent of a grand coalition. Germany being a federal construction, there is besides the Bundestag a kind of Senate representing the states. There, in the Bundesrat, Social Democrats will have a blocking majority for all essential legislation.

The coming years will see a lot of action in the Conference Committee, functioning like a two-party cartel. Mr. Scharping will be co-chancellor, and that means at best compromise über alles, at worst stalemate and immobility. So much for the German leadership that the rest of Europe regards with both desire and dread.

There will not be much cause for either of those emotions, not with the kind of Germany emerging from Sunday's elections. Germany will be what Germany was: sluggish, centrist, more modest than its clout might suggest. And that is not bad in a world that does not exactly suffer from a surfeit of political stability.

The writer, foreign and editorial page editor of Süddeutsche Zeitung, contributed this comment to the Herald Tribune.

✕ ⊗